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Payton E. Butler

University of Indianapolis, paytonbutler96@gmail.com

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WHY DO BOYS LOVE *FROZEN*?

PAYTON BUTLER, UNIVERSITY OF INDIANAPOLIS

MENTOR: GRETA PENNELL

Abstract

Frozen holds box office records for both Disney Princess films and animated features as a genre. The key to its success was capturing not only girls, but the whole child market of both girls and boys. How did “a princess movie” come to capture the heart and mind of the stereotypical American boy? Through analytical review of the film, as well as previous research on boys and their media preferences, I identify four factors that contribute to *Frozen*’s success: focused advertising, exciting action scenes, appealing humor, and a higher ratio of male to female characters. These factors have enabled boys to declare their love for *Frozen* without feeling the pressure of society telling them they were straying from gender appropriateness. My research demonstrates how certain features of a film can be influential, as well as the solidified nature of gender constancy in young boys, since the aspects that were meant to appeal to them did.

Introduction

For many months in 2013 and 2014, the lyrics from “Let it Go,” “Do You Want to Build a Snowman,” and “Love Is an Open Door” could be heard in grocery store aisles, the halls of schools, pediatricians’ waiting rooms, and in all corners of America where children were found. Boys and girls of all ages (and many adults who know and love the songs better than the children do) have caught *Frozen* fever. And America’s rough-and-tumble boys love the all-time best-selling Disney Princess film just as well as anyone else. *Frozen* is no typical princess movie; it is a bonafide action packed film, filled with humor and classic stories of bravery, good-vs-evil, and love. So what exactly has allowed *Frozen* to be so well-received by young male audiences?

Literature Review

Before exploring *Frozen* in further context, it's important to establish that Disney movies have been criticized and analyzed at both scholarly and popular level and have been shown to be highly influential in developing gender constancy in boys. Gender constancy reflects a child's growing and evolving understanding of the attributes that make them a girl or a boy. Though Faherty (2001) states that "it is apparent that there remains much skepticism some moderate, some intense concerning Disney's impact on children, families, and society itself" (p.4), Towbin (2003) identified five male stereotypes created by Disney:

"(a) Men primarily use physical means to express their emotions or show no emotions; (b) Men are not in control of their sexuality; (c) Men are naturally strong and heroic; (d) Men have non-domestic jobs; and (e) Overweight men have negative characteristics" (p. 28)

Not only do young boys and girls see these movies in the theater, they watch them repeatedly once they own them (Lin, 2001). This repeated viewing helps explain why Disney films are so influential over youth and how they serve as secondary socialization agents.

Previous research has identified a number of factors that spark a boy's interest when it comes to advertising, television shows, movies, or other media. As Bem (1983) noted, these factors don't spark interest because of nature or some biologically determined "boys will be boys" characteristics, but rather as the result of primary and secondary socialization agents such as a child's relationships with real people, fictional characters, and play things. Factors that appeal to boys and girls appeal to them because their gender identity is socially constructed; their preferences can be seen an expression of that identity. For example, Kline (1993) found that non-stop action and seeing male lead figures are important to young male audiences when determining if what they are watching is appropriate to their gender. Drawing on marketing studies of children's heroes and character preference, Kline (1993) believes market research magnified differences between boys and girls by describing boys as predisposed to pick up on heroic acts and preferring "rough and tumble characters who are on the right side of cataclysmic struggles between good and evil and win" (p. 195). These kinds of recommendations became the basis for the development of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Power Rangers. Hoffman & Cantor (1991) suggest that the appeal and enjoyment of action-packed and mildly frightening programs stems from children's sense of relief when the good guys win,

noting specifically that "3-11 year olds frequently mentioned relief from threat or danger as a reason that movies or television shows make him feel happy" (p. 42). Similarly, Thompson's (2001) analysis of Harry Potter contends:

"Harry exhibits those masculine traits American males so love to call their own: he is self-reliant, a risk taker, athletic, a leader, independent, defends his beliefs, protects the underdog" (p. 48).

Together, these studies indicate that a need for action, bravery, and comedy are ingrained masculine traits in American boys. It is also important for boys to see other boys in whatever they are watching. In his analysis of toy advertising, Kline (1993) reports that "peer play" is a dominant feature of ads aimed at children and that the kind of peer play depicted in ads is highly gendered (e.g, fewer than 23 % of children's commercials show boys and girls together). As Kline (1993) notes:

"The marketing logic behind this decision is clear. Children not only identify with kids they like but they often have a negative response to the child actors in the ads, those whom they find 'unrealistic,' 'inappropriate,' or simply not someone they would 'like to play with' . . . when producers use children who are too young or the wrong sex for the target group playing with the toy, kids complain" (p. 249).

It is reasonable to assume that they respond similarly when they see movies or television programs and won't hesitate to tell you "that's for babies!" or "that's for girls!"

It is also important to review the recent history of Disney Princess films to understand why have Disney has taken them in a gender-neutral direction. There have been four modern Disney Princess movies introduced since 2009: *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), *Tangled* (2010), *Brave* (2012), and *Frozen* (2013). *Princess and the Frog* underperformed at the box office, bringing in 222 million dollars of revenue (Orenstein, 2011). Though controversy was expected with Disney's first black princess character, low sales could not continue. By marketing to only girls, Disney Princess films were excluding half the child market (Orenstein, 2011). Notice the change of movie titles: *Tangled*, *Brave*, and *Frozen* are more gender-neutral and help make the films marketable to boys. The content of the films is also more gender neutral, focusing on action, bravery, and comedy, which are known to appeal to boys. With *Frozen*, Disney seems to have come up with the ideal formula to appeal to both boys and girls in a single film.

Methods / Results

To further investigate why boys love *Frozen*, I have conducted a content analysis to identify aspects of the movie that have specifically drawn such a wide male audience. Through watching the film, reviewing advertisements for the movie, researching scholarly articles on how boys and girls establish gender appropriateness, I identified a number of factors that made it so appealing to the young male audience. These factors include: gender-neutral advertising, action-packed scenes, including humor appealing to boys, and including a high ratio of male to female characters.

Analysis

ADVERTISING

In making *Frozen* marketable to boys, they had to be made to feel that it would be socially acceptable for them to see and like the film. This is crucial to *Frozen's* success because in commercial advertising, boys only respond to advertisements that fit into what they have come to understand as male attributes once they have developed gender constancy (Smith, 1994). Gender constancy is a forerunner to gender identity formation — the understanding that gender is a stable or permanent thing that can't be changed like a hairstyle or clothing.

Disney had to exclude titles with a feminine feel, so *Ice Queen* or *Snow Queen* would not have been considered. *Frozen*, however, is a gender-neutral term. Bem (1983) explains that children develop a readiness to organize information based on the gender schema theory concept that humans learn to cognitively categorize terms, items, and activities. Children are able to identify and discard sex-inappropriate words quickly and acquire terms that are sex-appropriate. However, when given an object that is neither, they are much slower to decide. Since there is no predetermined psychological association with the word “frozen” to link the child's mind to the boy category or the girl category, children will predetermine, based on the title, that the movie is for both genders.

Trailers are a very significant part of movie advertising, offering children the opportunity to decide whether the movie is for girls, boys, or both. The most-viewed trailer featured an unnamed snowman and reindeer across an ice pond from one another. The snowman sneezes, causing his carrot nose to skid across the pond. The reindeer sees the carrot as a snack

and both characters race for the treat/appendage. The reindeer wins their “race,” but instead of eating it, tosses it back to the snowman to play catch. The reindeer’s fur sends fluffs into the air causing the snowman to plug his carrot nose and sneeze, which causes his snowball head to blow off (Del Vecho, 2013). This trailer isn’t associated with princess or people at all, for that matter. It showed sport-like activity, friendship, and humor, all of which a boy would identify as acceptable to watch. In an interview between a father and son, when the boy was asked what he thought the movie would be about, he replied: “I just thought it would be about the snowman and the reindeer, and they’d just be walking around *la de la de la*” (Rowels, 2013).

ACTION-PACKED

Advertising alone cannot make a movie the best-selling animated movie of all time. Boys, girls, and their parents had to have loved it after its theatrical run for it to become the best-selling home-owned movie of all time. Boys particularly appreciate the numerous action scenes that in the film. A scene in an ice castle is an excellent example. Prince Hans, Ana’s romantic interest, and his men, including a contingent of villains, journey to find Ana and Elsa, the sister protagonists, to end a curse of eternal winter. Once the group arrives at Elsa’s ice castle, the villains try to destroy her. She uses her powers to defend herself and the ensuing battle puts the villains in serious peril (Del Vecho, 2013). The scene is family-friendly and not overly violent and it is one of many in the movie, including a wolf attack, a monster snowman attack, a perilous moment for one of the protagonists, and a climactic blizzard featuring close calls and heroic acts (Del Vecho, 2013).

This concept of non-stop thrill and action helps filmmakers capture boys’ attention. Kline’s (1993) examination of toy advertisements highlights the importance of the action and excitement in attracting the young male audiences because “boys are inclined to prefer masculine, invulnerable, invincible, strong-arm dominate action figures” (p. 195). Though Kline is describing character toys, this offers an evidential basis for the young male mind and his inclination for action-oriented scenes. As mentioned earlier in the literature review, American boys are often self-reliant and risk-takers, which lead them to being predisposed to enjoying action-packed scenes in media (Thompson, 2001).

BOY HUMOR

Frozen is chockfull of humor of the sort often enjoyed by boys. When male lead Kristoff is riding in a sleigh with Ana, he asks her how well she knows her love interest:

Kristoff: Have you had a meal with him yet? What if you hate the way he eats? What if you hate the way he picks his nose?

Anna: [disgusted] Picks his nose?

Kristoff: And eats it.

Anna: [annoyed] Excuse me, sir, he's a prince.

Kristoff: All men do it.

(Del Vecho, 2013)

This use of “boy humor” engages boys in the film and indicates a certain earthy sense of humor calibrated for the male audience. Aubrey & Harrison (2004) demonstrate that humor is considered a male attribute and hypothesized that a television program would need to feature a joke-telling character to please young male viewers. Through their study, they found that boys thought it was very important for a television show to have a humorous male character. Similarly Thompson (2001) deconstruction of the characters in the *Harry Potter* series revealed that Ron and Harry would rather have fun and be humorous (stereotypical boy attributes) than be studious (stereotypical girl attributes). This isn't to say that girls can't and don't enjoy these parts of the movie, but traditionally in our gender-stereotyped society, cruder jokes are reserved for the pleasure of the male audience.

BOY V. GIRL RATIO

The significant number of leading male figures in the film also help endear *Frozen* to boys. For children to determine whether or not something is for their gender, it is important for them to see their gender presented in it (Kline, 1993). While *Frozen* has been praised by feminists for featuring strong female protagonists in Elsa and Ana who are able to save themselves, the film also features at least four major male characters (Kristoff, Olaf the Snowman, Sven the Reindeer, and Prince Hans) who act bravely and heroically. Smith (1994) states a “that when gender-constant children saw advertisements showing models from only one sex, their subsequent behavior dramatically changed. Children either shunned or played with a toy depending on the sex of the models in the advertisement” (p. 4). Ultimately,

the appearance of an equal or greater number of male to female characters would be an important aspect for a boy, who has just developed gender constancy, to determine if they were allowed, or supposed to like the movie or not. In contrast to previous Disney Princess films, there was a 5:2 male to female ratio in *Frozen*.

Limitations and Future Research

An important caveat relative to the identification of gender-typed preferences in this analysis is that these preferences are not considered to be “natural” or inevitably tied to a child's biological sex, but socially constructed through children's relationships and experiences with primary and secondary socialization agents. Further, focusing on aspects of the film that specifically appealed to boys may obscure the story elements and aspects of the film that appeal to both boys and girls. Gender scholars generally recognize as Bem (1983) notes: “there is remarkable variability of individuals within groups as compared to the small mean differences between groups” (p. 613). Therefore, it is possible that relief from being scared and active heroines and heroes are gender-shared rather than gender-specific enjoyable elements. Teasing apart these differences could be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Another related issue for future research is to see how children's gendered preferences maybe changing and even be converging. For example, movies released since *Frozen* (e.g., *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *Home*, *Inside Out*) have strong, active female lead characters and seem to appeal to both boys and girls. Additional research is needed to analyze non-Disney Princess films based on the qualities identified in *Frozen*, as well as Disney films featuring non-human heroes.

Conclusion

By producing *Frozen* for male and female audiences, Disney doubled the size of the princess movie market and reaped substantial financial rewards. Moreover, these gains weren't just in the theater, but with merchandise as well. The success of the movie represents how solidified gender development has been in young boys, since what should have captured their attention and affection most certainly did, and contributed to the success of the film. Whether this deep-rooted form of gender development is a good thing will be determined by the ever-evolving culture in the United States. In the 1950's,

allowing a boy to play with baby dolls and questioning what made a man a man was not permissible within traditionally accepted gender norms. However, today, many parents are trying to let their children decide for themselves what it means to be a boy or girl. This research also demonstrates the impact of adding or removing certain features in a film. If the movie had a different title or avoided battle scenes, it seems unlikely that *Frozen* would have been as appealing to both boys and girls. Even at the time of this article's publication, three years after the movie's release, *Frozen* is everywhere. With an inevitable sequel due in 2018, Disney has the formula down for another hit designed to entice a new age group of girls and boys alike.

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